Lafayette Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 133, Lafayette, California 94549

President: Oliver Hamlin (o. 283-6822; h. 284-1446)
Editor: Shirley Thomson (o. 284-1166; h. 284-2995)

Vol. XVII, No. 3
October 1990

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A new season is upon us, and we are hoping for a change in the weather to bring us some much needed rain in Lafayette.

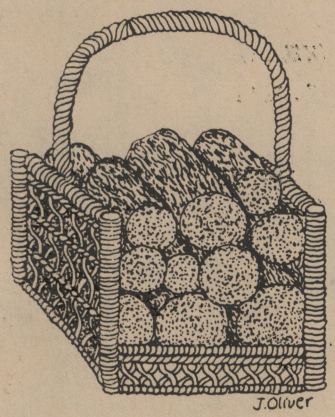
We have scheduled an evening meeting on Wednesday, November 14, for the general membership and the public with a talk by Ray Peters featuring some interesting facts about Lafayette's founder, Elam Brown, and his homesite. See details elsewhere in this newsletter.

Best wishes to you for a happy and safe Halloween. I hope to see you November 14.

Best regards,

Ollie -

Oliver D. Hamlin



7:30 p.m. – Wednesday, November 14, 1990 – Program Meeting – St. Anselm's Church

LHS DONATES HISTORICAL BOOKS

On the occasion of the city's "Birthday Bash" in June, Lafayette Historical Society donated personal copies of our publication, *LaFayette: A Pictorial History*, to all five members of the City Council. The gift was acknowledged by Mayor Richard Holmes. > > >

NEW LHS MEMBERS

Marilyn Bond, Walnut Creek
Dave and Bev Obera, Lafayette
Olga Peterson, Moraga
John Ebert, Lafayette
John Larson, Pleasant Hill
Basil and Elizabeth Rudnick, Lafayette
Bob and Patty Kahn, Lafayette

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VOLUNTEER NEEDED

Would you like to give a hand—and lend an ear—by transcribing oral history tapes? The Society could use your help. If interested, please call Oliver Hamlin (283-6822). > > >

NEXT BOARD MEETING

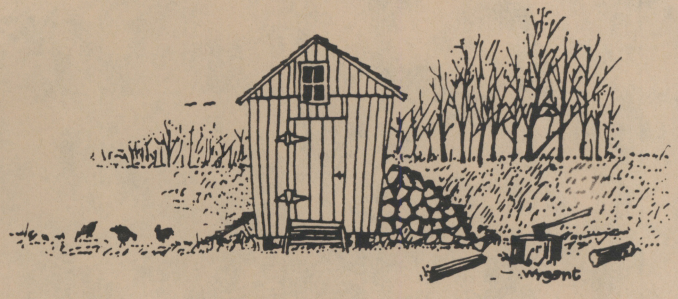
The next meeting of LHS Board members and committee chairpersons is scheduled for Wednesday, November 7, at the home of George Wasson. Members welcome. Call host's home or office (284-4603 or 283-4420) for directions. > > >

1990–1991 OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

President ..... *Oliver Hamlin*
Vice President ..... *Ray Peters*
Treasurer ..... *Nancy Holtzapple*
Recording Secretary ..... *Ruth Dyer*
Corresponding Secretary ..... *Jack Bailey*
Annual Potluck Dinner ..... *Richard Johnson*
Archives / Hist. Displays ..... *Bill & Irma Somerton*
Book Sales ..... *Ruth Dyer*
Fire Engine ..... *George Wasson*
Landmarks ..... *Bill Wakeman*
..... *Bob & Collette Means*
Membership ..... *Jack & Barbara Bailey*
Oral History ..... *George Wasson*
Newsletter ..... *Shirley Thomson*
Program ..... *Jop & Irene Van Overveen*
..... *Bill Wakeman*
Publicity ..... *Bill Somerton*
Walking Tours ..... *Collette Means*
(Without portfilio) ..... *GeorgeEly*

DUES

Family Membership *$10.00*
Student Membership *$2.50*
Life Membership *$100.00*
Business Membership *$50.00*



HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN SOMETHING?

An asterisk on your address label indicates your dues for 1990 are still not paid. Payment of $10 for a family membership will keep your name on our active list. Checks should be made payable to LHS and mailed to P.O. Box 133, Lafayette. Thanks. > > >

PROGRAM MEETING

Ray Peters to Speak:

"The Mystery of the Brown House"

St. Anselm's Episcopal Church – 682 Michael Lane, Lafayette
7:30 p.m. – Wednesday, November 14, 1990

For information, call Jop Van Overveen (283-3650, evenings) or Oliver Hamlin (283-6822 days).

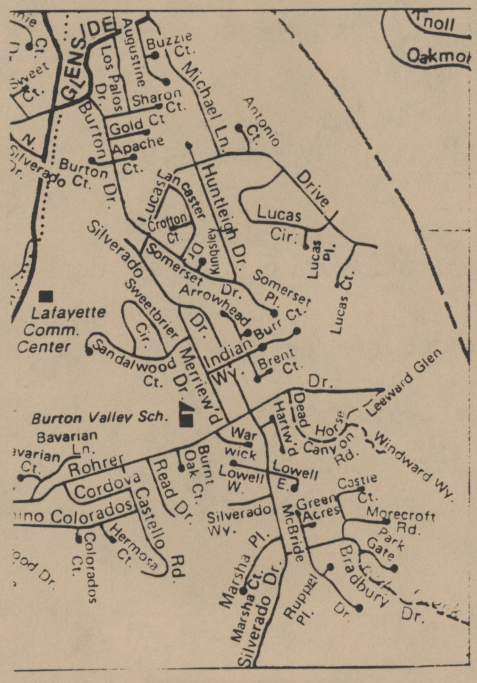
Ray Peters will discuss the early residences of the founder of Lafayette and efforts to precisely locate the site of his final residence –

- The various mills that Elam Brown built – they were not what they seemed – and a revelation about his barn
- Discussions with early residents of Lafayette and their recollections of the location of the house
- After his death, probate proceedings describing the land holdings in depth, as well as the locations of many structures
- A computer plotting of those records that aided in the location – so that ultimately a permanent monument was erected by the Historical Society to mark the site of the mysterious house.

STREET NAMES TELL THEIR OWN STORIES

by Oliver Hamlin

The Lafayette Historical Society received an inquiry from a young man named Monroe McBride of Concord recently about the origin of the street called McBride Drive in the Burton Valley area of Lafayette. The inquiry came to me so I made a few phone calls to see what I could find out. One of our Directors, Ray Peters, a surveyor by trade, told me about the process of tracing down the original subdivision map from the Public Works Department of the county in Martinez. On every such map is the name of the subdivider and/or developer, and he should be able to relate how the streets were named. Another of our Directors, George Wasson, has lived in the Burton Valley area for many years, so I called him. He told me that many of the streets in this particular area of Burton Valley were named for former executives of EBMUD; perhaps John McBride was one of them. He also mentioned the name of Don Crum.



I found John L. McBride's name in the local phone book and called him. Bingo! I got the whole story. The original developer was Utah Construction Company, and the subdivision engineer was Frank Draeger of Wilson and Company, a man thoroughly familiar with the area. His firm had done most of the subdivision engineering work in Lafayette and Moraga at that time for Moraga Land Company and Utah Construction Company. It was his job—in preparing the subdivision maps—to select the street names.

In the case of this Burton Valley community, Frank Draeger honored the various executives from EBMUD by naming streets after them. There had been some special engineering problems involved in extending the water lines in this area, so he wanted to give those men some special mention. Therefore, as I learned...

-*McBride Drive* was named for John L. McBride

-*Marsha Place* —for Mrs. John McBride

-*Bradbury Drive* —for William Bradbury

-*Ruppel Place* —for Robert Ruppel

-*Crum Court* — for Donald Crum (street name was later changed to Green Acres Court on petition of residents who did not like the sound of the name.).

McBride, Bradbury, Ruppel, and Crum worked for EBMUD in various capacities in the 1960s.

Now Monroe McBride has the whole story of how the street came to be called for his namesake (unrelated). Streets in Lafayette were named for a wide variety of people—former property owners, community leaders, wives, children, girl friends, mothers-in-law—as well, of course, for the ranchos, views, valleys, and such. I am proud that there are streets in Lafayette which are named after my father and grandfather as Oliver Court and Hamlin Road, so I have a special interest in the subject. > > >

"SLOCUM" EXCERPTS

For modern readers, this 1882 local history book provides more than mere reportage on the state of Contra Costa in the late 19th century. The style, tone, and color make it, you might say, historic history—a vivid example of the local histories of its time. The wary reader will discount the florid descriptions, note the generalizations, keep an eye on the facts—and prepare to enjoy some armchair time travel.

A short excerpt on Lafayette from the Slocum book is reprinted in this isue. Bracketed notations were added by Ray Peters (who submitted the piece) in an attempt to make locations and names more easily recognizable to 1990 readers whose personal histories may include a relatively short time in Lafayette.

The Slocum history is available through the Contra Costa County Historical Society. Both the book and a useful index to it—recently published by CCCHS's Bernard Freedman—can be purchased at the History Center (phone: 939-9180).

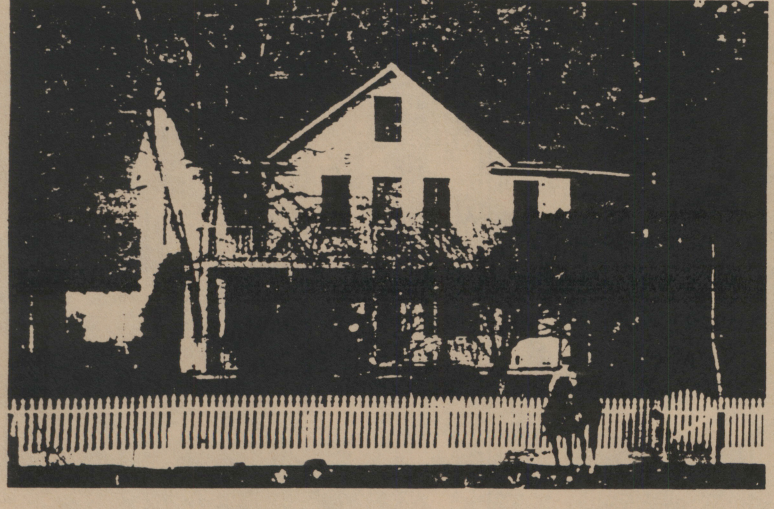
The careful reader should note that even as he acknowledges the value of the Slocum book in his index to it, Freedman firmly enjoins the reader: the book, he says, "would not pass muster in any scholarly circles" nowadays. It is, nevertheless, a major early source on county people and events, and it makes entertaining reading for lovers of local history. —*Ed.*

"LAFAYETTE AND ENVIRONS"

Excerpted from
HISTORY OF CONTRA COSTA COUNTY,
W. A. Slocum & Co., Publishers, 1882

(Annotated by Ray Peters)

Township number two [includes Lafayette] has the honor of claiming the second oldest settler in Contra Costa County. [William Welch was the first, in 1832.] In the year 1847 the Hon. Elam Brown, who had gone to the San Antonio redwoods [Canyon] from Santa Clara, learned that the Rancho Acalanes was in the hands of Wm. A. Leidesdorff, of Yerba Buena (San Francisco), for sale, the Spanish proprietor, Valencia, being in his debt. In due course the purchase of the grant was consummated, and on February 7, 1848, he brought up his family through the Moraga valley, and took formal possession; that same evening, while Mrs. Brown was engaged in preparing the meal, the men were hard at work erecting a temporary covering, fashioned after the most approved pioneer method [in the vicinity of present Happy Valley Road]. With Mr. Brown came his son Clarence, Josiah Allen (a son of Mrs. Brown by a former marriage), Melissa Allen, and Elizabeth Jane Allen. Before this, however, Mr. Brown had disposed of one-tenth of his newly acquired property for the insignificant sum of one hundred dollars, to Nathaniel Jones, who, about the same time, moved on to the tract.



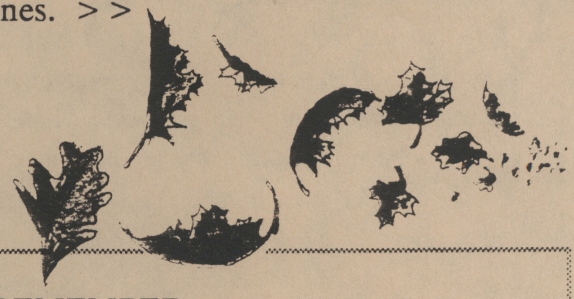
Locust Farm, built in 1850s, home of Nathaniel and Elizabeth Jones

As we first saw this beautiful locality [1881] the young grain had not yet put forth its heads, but all was a magnificent vista of never-ending emerald, from the depths of the valley to the summits of the adjacent hills. Everywhere proclaimed a rare fertility, and promise of large returns. How different, however, must the picture have been that first greeted the eyes

of those strangers [the Browns]. The country was rugged in the extreme; wild oats over-ran both hill and dale, through which indistinct trails found their way in perplexing confusion; traveling was more or less dangerous, for beasts of prey were plentiful, while all around bore evidence of an almost impossible fertility; the most that was looked for was unlimited pasturage for horses, sheep, and cattle.

It was thus that the district now under notice was occupied in 1847 when Mr. Brown acquired the Rancho Acalanes. On taking possession, his first care was the construction of a more substantial home than that mentioned above [his second house, still in Happy Valley], for which purpose he had brought with him lumber already cut and fit for use. This building he first placed about two miles from the present hamlet of Lafayette, on land now occupied by Thomas W. Bradley [in 1882], but the supply of water failing here, he was compelled to move to some more advantageous site, yet it was not until after the third transference that the place on which Mr. Brown now lives was selected. [This was on present Lafayette Circle; Lafayette Historical Society has erected a monument at the location.] At the same period Nathaniel Jones was engaged in the construction of his residence, and these were evidently the two first frame buildings erected in the township.

Here, then, were these two pioneer families, located far away from the world, but safely ensconced in a beautiful valley, with every promise of a bright future. Of course, the ordinary commodities of the household had to be procured from a distance, the nearest point being San Jose on one hand, and Yerba Buena [San Francisco] on the other. The first was a journey by land and the more readily undertaken, to reach the last the Bay intervened and acted as a deterrent. To the first named place the trip was by ox-team, but more often on horse-back, through the San Ramon valley, past the residence of Jose Maria Amador, and out at the point where the town of Hayward now stands, and thence on by the Mission San Jose to the Pueblo, where Dr. Stokes, and a year or two later Charles M. Weber, had well-stocked stores. With the establishment of a household, Mr. Brown, now true to his instincts, commenced to test the capabilities of the ground for farming purposes. In the Spring of 1848, he sowed some acres of wheat and barley—the Spaniards had before this sowed some very small quantities—all of which he had to transport to Sainsevain's mill at San Jose to have turned into flour. Mr. Brown, in the year 1849, bought a horse-power mill at Benicia, and erected it near his house on the land now occupied by Mr. Bradley [Happy Valley, remember], and thus saved the journey. In the Spring of this year, too, Mr. Jones commenced the artificial beautifying of his home, by planting those fine, large locust trees which now give the name of Locust Farm to his place of residence. These are the product of seed brought to the country by Major Stephen Cooper, of Benicia, in 1846, and subsequently presented to Mr. Jones. > >



WE REMEMBER

We sadly note the recent loss of long-time members of the Lafayette community; they were active and supportive of LHS and other organizations.

Wesley Rhoades - December 1989
Bill Zion - May 1990
Orville W. Jones - January 1990
Mildred Lloyd - June 1990
Mabel Bowbeer - August 1990
Mary McIvor - September 1990

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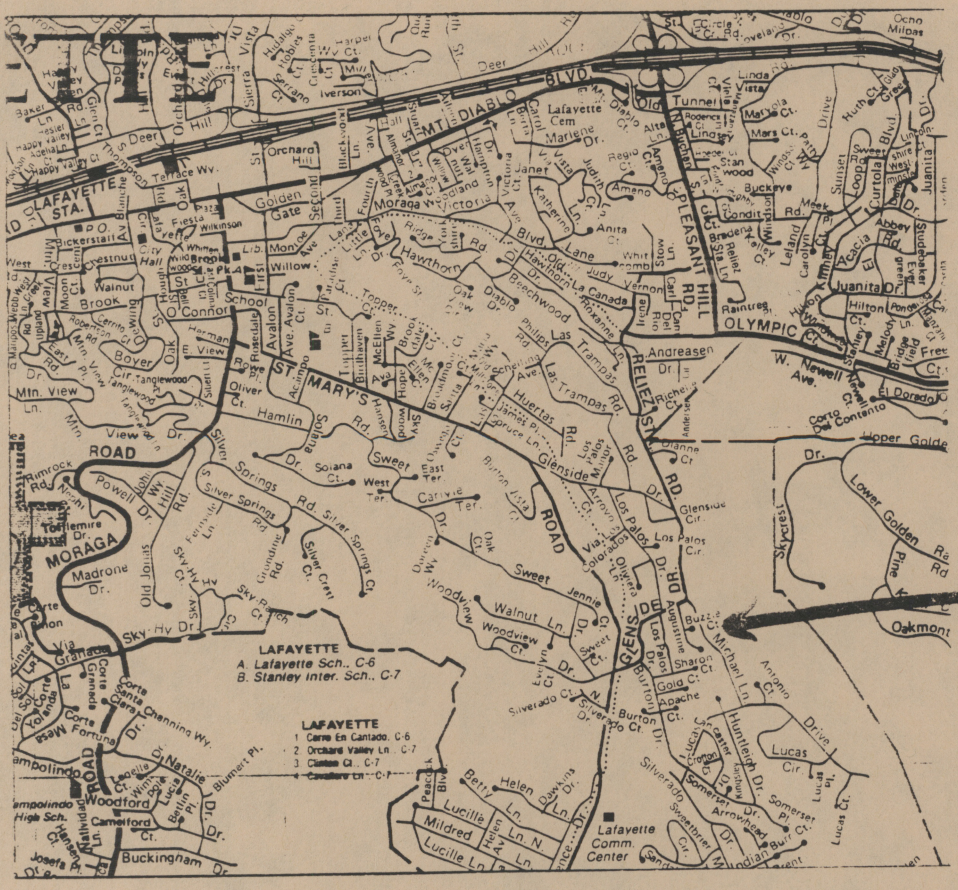

Map shows location of meeting site: St. Anselm's Episcopal Church, at 682 Michael Lane, Lafayette (just .2 mile off Reliez Station Road).

PROGRAM MEETING

7:30 p.m.
Wed.nesday,
November 14, 1990
St. Anselm's Church

LAFAYETTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 133
Lafayette, California 94549

FIRST CLASS MAIL